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Cuba's Castro: Reactions of an Aging Revolutionary to His Ailing Revolution

An Intelligence Memorandum

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**Cuba's Castro: Reactions of
an Aging Revolutionary
to His Ailing Revolution**

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Summary

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No longer the youthful and supremely self-confident revolutionary, Fidel Castro—now nearly 54 years old—is reacting in characteristic, if exaggerated, fashion to strong evidence that his revolution is in serious difficulty. Although Castro intellectually recognized that popular discontent was significant and increasing and had decided to counter it by ridding the island of several hundred thousand “undesirables,” he was at least initially, by the magnitude of the public discontent represented by the refugee exodus.

This major setback came on the heels of a series of political and personal losses. Because of the international reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Castro was not able to gain for Cuba a coveted seat on the UN Security Council, and he was not able to exploit Tito's death to gain undisputed leadership of the Nonaligned Movement. Furthermore, the death in January of his longtime friend and adviser, Celia Sanchez, deprived him of a moderating influence and a source of support during these difficult times.

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Castro
 quickly moved to direct the blame outward and to unify his people against the “imperialist” United States.

At home, Castro probably will continue to repress dissent rather than fundamentally attack its root causes. At the same time, he will seek new victories on the international scene to compensate for the poor prospects in Cuba. But such victories will not be easy to achieve. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has hurt him in Third World caucuses, and rising world tensions will make Cuban military interventions more risky.

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To the extent that Castro is denied external as well as internal success,

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**Cuba's Castro: Reactions of
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Fidel Castro's capacity to survive 27 years of revolutionary struggle rests on a blend of consummate political skill and [Redacted]

[Redacted] enabled him to survive numerous crises over the years.

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[Redacted]

Especially early in his regime, Castro was able to forestall dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promises of the revolution by persuasively promising a rosy future.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

As time went on, however, his capacity to carry the Cuban populace with him on the strength of his optimistic rhetoric weakened. In 1970, the failure to reach the production goal of 10 million tons of sugar came on the heels of a five-year period studded with policy failures. The dramatic failure of the sugar harvest—on which he had publicly staked the honor of the Cuban revolution—

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[Redacted]

Castro was moved to acknowledge in a major address in July 1970 that the failure was partly his fault.

[Redacted]

This seemed to sanction personal attacks on Castro. But when intellectuals dared to criticize him in response to this "permissive invitation," he reacted with Soviet-style repression, clamping down on critics. As he was confronted with increasing public dissatisfaction with his unfulfilled promises of a better life,

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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

He has often sought to demonstrate his strength on the world scene when domestic developments were troublesome, and his adventurism has paid off. As domestic difficulties became apparent by mid-1977, he chose to intervene in Ethiopia and demonstrated a willingness to provide greater support for Central American revolutionary groups. As problems mounted within Cuba, he played an increasingly active role in the Nonaligned Movement.

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Cuba's desperate need for hard currency forced Castro into a move that eventually sowed the seeds of magnified discontent. His decision in late 1978 to permit visits by Cuban exiles who brought gifts of consumer goods and tales of the good life in the United States made the Cuban people realize all the more clearly the gap between what they had been promised and what had been delivered. It set the stage for the unprecedented events of early April when thousands sought asylum in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, and for the subsequent stream of over 100,000 Cubans to the United States from the port of Mariel.

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Some have said that we are experiencing difficulties. This gives the impression that we are crossing a current, a river. It would be better to say that we are sailing in a sea of difficulties. We have been in this sea for some time, and we will continue in this sea, sometimes more stormy, at other times more calm, but the shore is far away . . . for a long time, who knows how long? . . . We will march through a sea of difficulties; we will not be crossing it.²

Even before the exodus, Castro clearly was aware that dissatisfaction was growing; he had been acknowledging partial failure of his revolution in a series of speeches over the past two years. In a 5 July speech to the People's Assembly concerning deficiencies in public services, he even went so far as to observe ruefully of the railroad, "Under capitalism it worked better." Most notable was his "secret" speech to the Assembly on 27 December 1979, which was subsequently disseminated to party cadres throughout Cuba and quickly became public. He spoke with candor, and in detail, about the problems facing the regime. He drew attention to the severe lack of hard currency, to plant diseases, import shortfalls, rising petroleum costs, and inefficiency, mismanagement, and waste. He indicated that "the severity of the difficulties we have encountered has led us to expand the circle of those in the know regarding these problems." In confronting the bleak economic prospects and the need to scale back the economic growth rate, he made clear that the difficulties were not transient.

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[redacted] he acknowledged there had been mismanagement and errors in judgment:

The main enemy is our own shortcomings. Cubans cannot go on blaming the US embargo for all their problems. The most important now are of their own making. . . . We are of age, since the revolution has completed 20 years, and as such we have to take the responsibility for these problems. . . .

Strongly reminiscent of his "mea culpa" speech of 1970, this acknowledgment of failure probably intensified the already widespread discontent. In order to prevent open criticism of the regime such as occurred in 1970, however, Castro imposed a crackdown on dissidents and instituted a governmental reorganization. The refugee crisis soon followed.

² Castro to the People's Assembly, 27 December 1979.

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Despite his statements and the evidence indicating a significant increase in popular discontent during the past year [redacted]

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[redacted] managed to convert the embarrassment to his regime into a fierce attack on the United States.

The intensity of his reactions probably stems from the fact that the current crisis--like the 1970 crop failure-- [redacted]

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[redacted] He had looked to 1979-80 as the time he would be confirmed as undisputed leader of the Nonaligned Movement. When the Nonaligned Summit took place in Havana in September 1979, Castro used the occasion to make a strong bid for its leadership, ideological as well as titular. Although he was not fully successful at the summit, Tito's health was failing, and Castro saw his time coming. He also hoped to enhance Cuba's international prestige by winning a seat on the UN Security Council. But the invasion of Afghanistan by his Soviet patron halted Castro's momentum. In the face of clear signs that opinion had shifted, he withdrew Cuba's application for a Council seat in January. When Tito died, Castro could not exploit the opportunity; in an ironic twist of fate, he could not even attend the funeral because of the Peruvian Embassy crisis.

The death of Celia Sanchez in January was another profoundly unsettling loss. She had been with him since the days in the Sierra Maestra and was both a wise counselor and moderating influence. Deprived of her support and advice, [redacted]

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Outlook

Castro is now nearly 54 years old [redacted]

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[redacted] However aware Castro is of Cuba's internal problems, he is unlikely to restrict his efforts on the international scene and concentrate on remedying problems at home. On the contrary, his success in turning public attention to the United States in the current crisis and his success during recent years in exploiting opportunities in Africa, Central

¹ From 1978 to 1979, the number of Cubans illegally departing by boat jumped from 19 to 374; the number illegally gaining entrance to Guantanamo jumped from three to 35; and the number forcing their way into embassies rose from zero to 28.

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America, and the Caribbean argue for increased Cuban efforts in the international arena. [redacted] unable to hold up Cuba as a total success, Castro will be moved to intensify his efforts to be a revolutionary on the international scene while he represses dissent at home.

Victories will not be easy to achieve. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan will make Castro's attempts to sustain a leadership role in the Nonaligned Movement more difficult. Increased international tensions will make military adventures abroad more risky. The decreased likelihood of success on the international scene, in concert with the bleak prospects for improvement at home, [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted] Any diplomatic moves by Castro [redacted] will be designed to maneuver the United States to yield so he can depict the outcome as a victory. [redacted]

[redacted]

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